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Letter dated 10 July 2007 from the Permanent Representative of France to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council

In my capacity as Chairman of the Working Group of the Security Council on Children and Armed Conflict, I have the honour to submit a report on the activities of the Working Group since the submission of my last annual report on 10 July 2006.

I should be grateful if you would have this letter and the enclosed report issued as a document of the Security Council.

(*Signed*) Jean-Marc **de La Sablière**

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Annual report on the activities of the Working Group of the Security Council on Children and Armed Conflict, established pursuant to resolution 1612 (2005) (July 2006-June 2007)

I. Introduction

1. The Security Council adopted on 26 July 2005 resolution 1612 (2005) on children and armed conflict, jointly sponsored by Benin and France.

2. In paragraph 8 of resolution 1612 (2005), the Council decides to establish a working group of the Security Council consisting of all members of the Council to review the reports of the mechanism referred to in paragraph 3 of the resolution, to review progress in the development and implementation of the action plans mentioned in paragraph 7 and to consider other relevant information presented to it; decides further that the working group shall:

(a) Make recommendations to the Council on possible measures to promote the protection of children affected by armed conflict, including through recommendations on appropriate mandates for peacekeeping missions and recommendations with respect to the parties to the conflict;

(b) Address requests, as appropriate, to other bodies within the United Nations system for action to support implementation of the resolution in accordance with their respective mandates.

3. After consultations among the members of the Council, it was agreed that Mr. Jean-Marc de la Sablière, Permanent Representative of France to the United Nations would serve as Chairman of the Working Group (see S/2005/659). The same decision was taken in 2007 (see S/2007/20).

4. The Chairman of the Working Group submitted a report to the Council on the activities of the Group during the year following the adoption of resolution 1612 (2005) (S/2006/497). Since that report, the Working Group has held four formal meetings, on 6 September and 8 November 2006, 9 February and 10 May 2007; it planned to hold a fifth meeting on 19 July 2007. Following each one of those meetings, the Chairman issued brief press statements which are available on the website of the Permanent Mission of France to the United Nations.

II. Institutional developments

5. At its meeting of 2 May 2006, the Working Group entrusted the Chairman with the task of preparing an informal "toolbox" for the Working Group identifying possible types of direct action or recommendations that the Working Group could make to the Council within its mandate. Following extensive consultations, agreement was reached on the non-paper at the meeting of 6 September 2006. It was agreed that the "toolkit" of the Working Group would be issued as a document of the Security Council through the President of the Security Council. That document was issued on 11 September 2006 (S/2006/724). Since then, the Working Group has made extensive use of various provisions in the "toolkit" when adopting conclusions on a variety of situations it has had to consider.

6. At its meeting of 8 November 2006, the Working Group tasked the Chairman with preparing a provisional programme of work for 2007. That provisional programme was considered at the 9 February 2007 meeting and agreement was reached on the text on 16 February 2007. The programme spreads out the Group's work throughout the year. It provides the Secretary-General and members of the Group with a clear indication as to when specific issues would be taken up and allows them to make appropriate arrangements. The work programme is an internal document of the Working Group and copies have been provided to the Secretary-General, his Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict and the Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) only. However, it has been used to provide advanced information to the missions of the countries concerned whenever the Working Group was preparing to consider a report of the Secretary-General on a situation that directly concerned them.

7. Following the meeting of 10 May 2007, and with the agreement of members of the Working Group, the Chairman held discussions with the Secretariat with a view to having the documents of the Working Group published under a symbol unique to the Working Group. Since then, the principle of creating such a symbol has been agreed. Beginning in July 2007, it should simplify the procedure for the issuance of documents prepared by the Group and enhance transparency by making it easier for all delegations and interested parties to search for documents in the United Nations documentation system.

III. Substantive issues addressed

1. Fifth meeting (6 September 2006)

8. At its fifth meeting on 6 September 2006, the Working Group adopted conclusions with respect to the report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (S/2006/389). The conclusions were published on 11 September 2006 as document S/2006/724. The Chairman of the Working Group then carried out the tasks entrusted to him in the context of those conclusions, including by drawing the attention of the Security Council to the need to follow up on the recommendations addressed to it.

9. At that meeting, the Group also discussed the report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in the Sudan (S/2006/662). Ms. Coomaraswamy, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, introduced the report of the Secretary-General and recalled its three main conclusions:

(a) The persistence of a serious and unacceptable situation for the children of the Sudan, characterized by the recruitment and use of children by all parties to the conflict, including in the Darfur region;

(b) The particularly high level of sexual violence against children, especially girls, and the need to combat the almost total impunity in that regard;

(c) The specific problems raised by inadequate access of children to health care and protection and by the lack of access by the monitoring mechanism and humanitarian teams to children.

10. The Permanent Representative of the Sudan underlined the readiness of the Government of National Unity to cooperate, noted the complexity of the situation in the country after a protracted civil war, provided information about the measures taken by his Government in the constitutional, legislative and other spheres to protect children, ensuring such measures were taken into account by the Working Group, and insisted on the need to keep discussions on children and armed conflict in the Working Group and ongoing discussions in the Security Council on the situation in the Sudan as separate issues.

11. The main elements of the exchange of views that ensued among the Working Group were as follows:

(a) Members of the Working Group took note of the report submitted by the Secretary-General in accordance with resolution 1612 (2005), and participants in the discussion emphasized its quality;

(b) The participants in the discussion expressed their concern regarding violations cited in the report, such as killing and maiming of children, their recruitment and use as soldiers by many armed forces and groups, grave sexual violence, abductions, and denial of humanitarian access, that continued in the Sudan largely unabated;

(c) Most of the participants called for the adoption of vigorous recommendations in order to improve existing preventive and punitive measures aimed at protecting the rights of the child; end impunity; increase accountability for acts of violence against children committed by members of the military and armed groups; and accelerate the implementation of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes for children;

(d) The Working Group should envisage recommendations that foster cooperation between humanitarian and other international actors and the parties to the conflict, bringing concrete improvements to the situation of children on the ground, including access of services to children;

(e) The Working Group should ensure that, in the course of implementation of the Darfur Peace Agreement, the protection of children, with special attention to the girl child, remains a priority;

(f) Concern was expressed for the lack of humanitarian access, monitoring and assistance to children in several regions of the Sudan;

(g) There was general support for the Secretary-General's intention to send the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict on a mission to the Sudan at an appropriate date in the near future;

(h) Some delegations mentioned, during the discussion, that the implementation of Security Council resolution 1706 (2006) would contribute to improving the situation of children affected by armed conflict in the Sudan.

12. Following the discussion, the experts were entrusted with negotiating the Group's draft conclusions to the Council as follow-up to the Secretary-General's report.

13. Ms. Rima Salah, Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF, then introduced the Secretary-General's "horizontal note", drawing attention to the previous summer's tragic events in the Middle East, especially in Lebanon, the Occupied Palestinian

Territories and Israel. She also updated the Group on the situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

14. Lastly, the Special Representative briefed the Group on the status of the report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Sri Lanka.

2. Sixth meeting (8 November 2006)

15. At its sixth meeting on 8 November 2006, the Working Group adopted its conclusions pertaining to the report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in the Sudan (S/2006/662), which were published on 13 December 2006 as document S/2006/971. The Chairman of the Working Group then carried out the tasks entrusted to him in the context of those conclusions, including by drawing the attention of the Security Council to the need to follow up on the recommendations addressed to it.

16. At that meeting, the Group also discussed the report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Burundi (S/2006/851). The Special Representative introduced the report and highlighted its main conclusions:

(a) Despite the substantial progress achieved in addressing the grave violations of children's rights, violations were still occurring and the competent authorities had not always conducted criminal investigations nor punished those responsible. Violations of children's rights were mainly attributable to the Parti pour la libération du peuple hutu-Forces nationales de libération (Palipehutu-FNL), the Burundi National Defence Force (FDN), the National Intelligence Service (SNR) and the Burundi National Police;

(b) A Comprehensive Ceasefire Agreement had been signed on 7 September 2006 at Dar-es-Salaam between the Government of Burundi and Agathon Rwasa's Palipehutu-FNL, the last active rebel movement. In implementing the ceasefire agreement and subsequently demobilizing the FNL combatants, priority needed to be given not only to demobilizing children to allow them to be immediately reunited with their families and reintegrated into their communities, but also to releasing the children currently detained by the Government and accused of collaborating with FNL.

17. The Permanent Representative of Burundi explained that his Government's strategy to improve the situation of children had been to focus, after 13 years of conflict that had torn the country apart, on the achievement of a peace agreement with Palipehutu-FNL and on the development of legislation and positive measures for child protection and education; he recognized that progress still had to be made in areas such as the implementation of legal and justice system reform, awareness on the rights of the child, and the fight against impunity. The Government of Burundi was determined to improve the situation, was open to dialogue with the United Nations on child rights, and hoped that the international community would continue to support activities in the field of children's disarmament, demobilization and reintegration.

18. The main elements of the ensuing exchange of views among the Working Group were as follows:

(a) The Secretary-General's analysis and recommendations contained in the report met with a favourable response;

(b) The Chairman summed up the discussion by recognizing that Burundi was at a crucial phase of its transition from conflict to peace. He stated that it was important for the Government of Burundi and the international community to work together to ensure that special attention was given to child protection in the process of demobilization, and that measures were taken to put an end to the culture of impunity.

19. Following the discussion, the experts were entrusted with negotiating the Group's draft conclusions to the Council as follow-up to the Secretary-General's report.

20. At that meeting, the Group also discussed the report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Côte d'Ivoire (S/2006/835). The Special Representative introduced the report, highlighting its main conclusions:

(a) The report specified the grave violations perpetrated against children in Côte d'Ivoire, particularly the killing and maiming of children, rape or other instances of grave sexual violence, especially against girls, and the abduction of and trafficking in children;

(b) It also highlighted the progress made in dialogue with parties to the conflict and outlined the consequent action plans of the Forces nouvelles and four pro-Government militia groups in western Côte d'Ivoire to end the use of child soldiers and release all children associated with their forces;

(c) It stressed the responsibility of the Government and the Front populaire ivoirien to support the United Nations in the identification and establishment of similar dialogue with all other militia groups;

(d) The report recommended targeted action and measures against parties and individuals that systematically committed grave violations against children and rigorous and timely investigation and prosecution by relevant authorities of incidents of grave violations against children to address the prevailing culture of impunity.

21. The Permanent Representative of Côte d'Ivoire underlined that only non-government forces or pro-government self-defence militias had been involved in the recruitment and use of child soldiers. He agreed on the necessity of further identification of those militias and said that cooperation between them and the National Programme of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration should be encouraged. Côte d'Ivoire would ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict as soon as possible.

22. The main elements of the ensuing exchange of views among the members of the Working Group were as follows:

(a) The report of the Secretary-General and the close engagement of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, UNICEF and the United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) with all parties on the ground were welcomed;

(b) Concern was expressed at incidents of grave child rights violations as identified in the Secretary-General's report, including killing, maiming, and the use and abduction of and trafficking in children by parties to armed conflict;

(c) Persistent incidents of rape and other sexual violence against girls was a cause of grave concern;

(d) Grave concern was expressed that these serious violations committed against children were generally not investigated or prosecuted;

(e) The recent commitments made by the Forces nouvelles and several self-defence militias in western Côte d'Ivoire, through the recent signing of action plans to end the recruitment and use of child soldiers, were commended;

(f) The responsibility of the Ivorian authorities to engage other armed groups under their control to enter in a similar dialogue was underlined.

23. Following the discussion, the experts were entrusted with negotiating the Group's draft recommendations to the Council as follow-up to the Secretary-General's report.

24. The Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF then introduced the Secretary-General's "horizontal note", drawing attention to the situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Sudan and Sri Lanka:

(a) In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a large number of children associated with the armed forces remained inaccessible and could not benefit from the national disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programme. There were continuing reports of harassment and threats against children who were formerly in the armed forces by members of the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC). It was reported that an increasing number of children were returning to the transition centres because they feared that they might be recruited, arrested, harassed or extorted;

(b) In the Sudan, the deterioration of security situation in Darfur hampered surveillance activities. Violations committed included the killing and mutilation of children, the recruitment and use of child soldiers, grave sexual violence, attacks on hospitals and schools and denial of humanitarian access;

(c) In Sri Lanka, fighting in the north and east of the country had caused massive human displacement. The Karuna faction of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam continued to recruit many children.

3. Seventh meeting (9 February 2007)

25. At its seventh meeting on 9 February 2007, the Working Group adopted its conclusions pertaining to the reports of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Burundi (S/2006/851) and in Côte d'Ivoire (S/2006/835). Those conclusions were published on 15 February 2007 as documents S/2007/92 and S/2007/93, respectively. The Chairman of the Working Group then carried out the tasks entrusted to him in the context of those conclusions, including by drawing the attention of the Security Council to the need to follow up on the recommendations addressed to it.

26. At that meeting, the Group also discussed the Secretary-General's report on children and armed conflict in Nepal (S/2006/1007).

27. The Special Representative introduced the report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Nepal, highlighting its main conclusions:

(a) Although there had been a remarkable improvement in the situation of children in Nepal since the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the Government and the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M) in November 2006, the continuing recruitment of children by CPN-M throughout the country was a serious source of concern. Some 40 per cent of those fresh recruits were girls. Schools continued to be targeted while the abductions continued;

(b) The resolution 1612 (2005) mechanism ensured compliance by the parties to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of their commitments towards children. The United Nations teams, together with the parties to the Agreement, also contributed to the reintegration of child soldiers;

(c) The parties and the international community also had the duty to remove the antipersonnel mines that continued to directly threaten the lives of children.

28. The Permanent Representative of Nepal underlined that most of the reported violations tended to relate to the situation in Nepal before the conclusion of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. His Government generally favoured recommendations that included provisions for the protection of children in all phases of the peace process; an immediate end to the practice of recruiting and using children; the return of children to their families; ridding schools and hospitals of any activity that hampered the welfare of children; the reform of the juvenile justice system; the granting of unimpeded access to all human rights and humanitarian personnel working for children's welfare; and increased cooperation and coordination with United Nations and other agencies for the welfare of children affected by the armed conflict in Nepal. He underlined the recent agreement between CPN-M and the United Nations Mission in Nepal (UNMIN) that no children under the age of 18 would be registered as soldiers during the process of cantonment of CPN-M combatants and stressed the importance of aligning the recommendations of the Working Group with the peace process.

29. The main elements of the ensuing exchange of views among the members of the Working Group were as follows:

(a) Members welcomed the submission of the report pursuant to Security Council resolution 1612 (2005) and the recommendations contained therein;

(b) Grave concern was expressed that the recruitment and use, as well as the abduction, of children by CPN-M had continued even after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement by the Government of Nepal and CPN-M on 21 November 2006;

(c) Particular concern was expressed regarding the situation of the girl child, since in the most recent recruitments some 40 per cent of the new recruits appeared to be girls;

(d) Measures to combat impunity were essential. In this regard, some Member States mentioned the need to bring to account those responsible for the torture and death of Maina Sunuwar. The responsibility of the Government to tackle such an issue was underlined;

(e) The Government of Nepal was encouraged to become party to the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime;

(f) The role of the donor community was critical in supporting civil society, peace transitions and capacity-building for child reintegration programmes;

(g) The commitments of the parties to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement to pay special attention to the needs of children and to release and reintegrate those associated with armed groups, as well as their cooperation with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), were commended;

(h) The cooperation of the Government of Nepal with the Working Group and the Office of the Special Representative, and in particular its intention to invite the Special Representative to visit Nepal in May 2007, was welcomed;

(i) It was noted that the recommendations of the Working Group were expected to advance the peace process in Nepal;

(j) The members of the Working Group stressed that the case of children and armed conflict in Nepal was the first situation considered by the Working Group on the basis of annex II to the report of the Secretary-General submitted pursuant to resolution 1612 (2005) (S/2006/826) and that addressing it appropriately would enhance the work of the Working Group.

30. Further to the discussion, the experts were entrusted with negotiating the Group's draft recommendations to the Council as follow-up to the Secretary-General's report.

31. At that meeting, the Group also discussed the Secretary-General's report on children and armed conflict in Sri Lanka (S/2006/1006). Following a briefing by her Special Adviser, Mr. Allan Rock, on his recent visit to Sri Lanka, the Special Representative introduced the report of the Secretary-General and highlighted its main conclusions:

(a) The report reflected increased fighting and escalating levels of violence since mid-2006 in the conflict-affected areas of Sri Lanka since the breakdown of the ceasefire for the peace talks between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam;

(b) It provided information on recruitment of children, killings, denial of humanitarian access and attacks against schools and hospitals. It was disappointing to note that LTTE had never honoured its undertaking in 2003 to release the child soldiers in its ranks. More than 1,500 children under the age of 18 remained with LTTE and hundreds had been recruited recently. That was the reason for the Secretary-General's recommendations that the Security Council should adopt targeted measures against LTTE;

(c) It also documented an increasing pattern of abduction and recruitment of children in the eastern region of the country by the Karuna faction, a development which must be combated. The fact that such abduction and recruitment occurred in areas considered to be under Government control was all the more worrying, raising questions about the complicity of certain elements of the Sri Lankan security forces.

32. The Permanent Representative of Sri Lanka to the United Nations reiterated the commitment of his Government to cooperate fully with the international community and the Working Group with a view to putting an end to violations and

abuses against children in armed conflict. The Government of Sri Lanka reaffirmed its policy of zero tolerance for the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict. According to the report of the Secretary-General, LTTE was the main party responsible for serious violations and abuses against children in armed conflict, such as the unlawful recruitment, use and abduction of such children. The Permanent Representative reiterated the views of his Government on the implementation of the recommendations of the Secretary-General as set out in his aide-memoire to the Chairman of the Working Group. While questioning the reliability of sources, the Permanent Representative indicated that the Government of Sri Lanka would take the action necessary to investigate the allegations made against elements of its security forces regarding the recruitment and abduction of children by the Karuna faction. He also indicated that the Government was fully committed to the rehabilitation and reintegration of child combatants who escaped from armed groups, and had introduced a new legal regime in that regard.

33. The main elements of the subsequent exchange of views among members of the Working Group are summarized below:

(a) Members welcomed the submission of the report pursuant to Security Council resolution 1612 (2005) and stressed the need to consider the recommendations contained therein in accordance with the Working Group's own mandate;

(b) The Government of Sri Lanka was commended for its cooperation with the Working Group;

(c) Grave concern was expressed about the fact that the continuous pattern of abduction, recruitment and use of children by LTTE, as reported, inter alia, in the successive reports of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict, was going on despite previous commitments made by LTTE in March 2003 under the action plan for children affected by war. Despite the commitment by LTTE to release all children within its ranks, only a few children had been released to date. Besides, the pattern of abduction, recruitment and use of children had increased over the recent period. Today LTTE remains the main party responsible for serious violations against children in armed conflict in Sri Lanka;

(d) Grave concern was also expressed about the development of a recent but increasing pattern of abduction and recruitment of children in the eastern region by the Karuna faction;

(e) Concern was expressed about the fact that the Karuna faction had abducted children in areas considered to be under Government control, raising questions about the complicity of certain elements of the security forces. In that regard, the Government's responsibility for bringing an end to impunity was highlighted, and the Government was encouraged to proceed, in conformity with its commitments, with its investigation of certain elements of the security forces regarding allegations of participation in child abduction.

34. Further to the discussion, the experts were entrusted with negotiating the Group's draft recommendations to the Council as follow-up to the Secretary-General's report.

35. The Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF introduced the Secretary-General's "horizontal note", drawing attention to the situation in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Sudan:

(a) In Burundi, the United Nations teams had been allowed unhindered access to children at the new site to which they had been transferred, pursuant to the recommendations of the Working Group. However, their reintegration into the community continued to pose problems. The Government of Burundi did not have sufficient funds to launch the reintegration programme. Moreover, FNL continued to recruit children;

(b) In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a fresh outbreak of fighting had displaced 20,000 civilians. In late 2006, a delegation comprising Government, FARDC and United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC) representatives had met with the principal leaders of the armed groups that were still active. The ensuing negotiations had produced a disarmament, demobilization and reintegration plan. However, a financial crisis had prevented the Government from implementing that plan in the eastern part of the country. Lastly, many children's corpses had been found in three mass graves discovered in late 2006;

(c) In the Sudan, the violations committed in Darfur during that period included the killing and maiming of children, their recruitment and use as soldiers, grave sexual violence, attacks on schools and hospitals and denial of humanitarian access to children.

4. Eighth meeting (10 May 2007)

36. At its eighth meeting on 10 May 2007, the Working Group adopted its conclusions on the reports of the Secretary-General on children in armed conflict in Nepal and Sri Lanka. Those conclusions would be issued shortly under the Working Group's new document symbols system. However, since 11 May 2007, an advanced unofficial version of these conclusions has been available on the website of the Permanent Mission of France to the United Nations for information.

37. At that meeting, the Group also discussed the report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Uganda (S/2007/260).

38. The Special Representative introduced the report of the Secretary-General on children in armed conflict in Uganda and highlighted its main conclusions:

(a) About 25,000 children had been abducted since the onset of the conflict in northern Uganda. It was estimated that up to 2,000 women and children might still be held by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) within its ranks. Despite repeated pleas by various stakeholders, LRA has not released any women and children from its ranks;

(b) Children were present in the ranks of the armed forces, especially within the local defence units, which were de facto under the responsibility of the regular armed forces, although the 2005 Uganda People's Defence Forces Act prohibited the recruitment of children under the age of 18. The discussions on a plan of action for the demobilization of children that have been ongoing since 2006 must therefore be concluded as a matter of priority;

(c) Sexual violence perpetrated by UPDF and local defence unit soldiers, particularly against displaced persons, remained a serious problem;

(d) While the signing of a formal Cessation of Hostilities Agreement on 26 August 2006 was a step in the right direction, there was a need to ensure that the situation of children, including the release without any conditions of the children present in the ranks of LRA, remained a priority consideration under the peace process.

39. The Permanent Representative of Uganda welcomed the work of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, her visit to his country in June 2006 and the activity of the Uganda Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting (UTFMR). He referred to the 2005 Uganda People's Defence Force Act that prohibited the recruitment of children under the age of 18 and pointed to the fact that no recruitment in the armed forces was possible without the consent of the chiefs of local communities. He acknowledged that poverty could have led parents to get their children "employed" in the armed forces by overstating their age. He stated that the conduct of independent on-site monitoring visits to military barracks should be considered with due respect for the sovereignty of Uganda. He declared that the Ugandan Government was committed to finalizing with the Task Force a plan of action pursuant to resolution 1612 (2005). He promised the cooperation of his Government to work on the basis of the Secretary-General's report on children and armed conflict in Uganda and expressed the wish that UPDF and LDU would not be mentioned in the annexes to the next annual report of the Secretary-General.

40. The main elements of the subsequent exchange of views among the Working Group were as follows:

(a) The members of the Working Group welcomed the submission of the Secretary-General's report and recommendations contained therein in accordance with Security Council resolution 1612 (2005);

(b) They also welcomed the cooperation of the Government of Uganda with the Working Group, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General and the Uganda Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting (UTFMR);

(c) Tribute was paid to the participation of Uganda in the "Free Children from War" conference held in Paris on 5 and 6 February 2007 at which the participants committed themselves to making every effort to uphold and apply the Paris Principles wherever possible in their political, diplomatic, humanitarian, technical assistance and funding roles, consistent with their international obligations;

(d) Some members reaffirmed that any children recruited and used by the Lord's Resistance Army must be immediately released. While noting the importance of the Juba Peace Talks, it was underlined that the release of children could not be made dependent upon the conclusion of a peace agreement. Members of the Working Group stressed that progress in the peace process on the ground would contribute to the improvement of the situation of children;

(e) A strong message ought to be passed to the LRA leaders. The wish was expressed for close cooperation between the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict and the Special Envoy for areas affected by LRA;

(f) Bearing in mind the 2005 Uganda People's Defence Force Act that prohibited the recruitment of children under the age of 18, concern was expressed that children were present among the local defence units, which were de facto under the responsibility of UPDF;

(g) Members of the Working Group underlined that the case of children in armed conflict in Uganda was an Annex II situation considered by the Working Group on the basis of the Secretary-General's report (S/2006/826) and that addressing it appropriately would enhance the work of the Working Group.

41. At that meeting, the Group also discussed the report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Somalia (S/2007/259). The Special Representative introduced the report of the Secretary-General and highlighted its main conclusions.

(a) The situation of children in Somalia remained grave and precarious. Violations against children included killings and maiming, especially as a result of crossfire or the use of anti-personnel mines, their recruitment and use by armed groups, sexual violence and abduction;

(b) The weak presence of the international community in the field complicated its understanding of the situation. Humanitarian access by child protection actors was a significant challenge, in particular in central and southern Somalia, where the vast majority of grave child violations occurred;

(c) It was confirmed that both the Transitional Federal Government and Union of Islamic Courts affiliated armed groups recruited and used children in their forces.

42. Since it had not had sufficient time to review the report, the Permanent Mission of the Somali Republic did not participate in the meeting. However, it contributed through written comments to the subsequent discussions of the Working Group. In its comments, the Permanent Mission of the Somali Republic:

(a) Questioned the level of credibility of some information and sources mentioned in the report and insisted, in that context, on the need for an increased presence of United Nations organizations in Somalia;

(b) Stressed the need to restore, as a matter of priority, security and law and order in Somalia, inter alia through the implementation of its National Security and Stabilization Plan, and called upon the international community to step up assistance in that field;

(c) Underlined the responsibility of extremist groups in the perpetuation of violence and insecurity in Somalia and the need for all groups, including the remnants of the Union of Islamic Courts, to renounce violent methods and endorse democracy;

(d) Reiterated the commitment of the Transitional Federal Government to the welfare of children and human rights for all, and to fostering progress towards reconciliation through the convening of an all-inclusive National Reconciliation Conference.

43. The main elements of the subsequent exchange of views among the Working Group were as follows:

(a) The members of the Working Group welcomed the continued hard work of the Somalia Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting and its contribution to the Secretary-General's report in the light of the challenges it faced in the deteriorated security environment of Somalia and welcomed the recommendations contained in the report;

(b) Grave concern was expressed that recruitment and use, as well as abductions of children by several parties to the conflict, including Transitional Federal Government armed forces and Union of Islamic Court affiliated armed groups, had continued over the period covered by the report;

(c) Grave concern was also expressed about the large number of children killed and maimed as a result of fighting, widespread insecurity, availability of small arms, and the use of anti-personnel landmines by the belligerents, and in this context, the importance of the respect by all parties to the conflict of international humanitarian law and other applicable international standards and norms was stressed;

(d) Several members were also particularly worried by the fact that the situation of children had probably deteriorated since the end of the period covered by the report, due to the recrudescence of fighting and military operations, notably in April 2007;

(e) The participation at Ministerial level of the Transitional Government of Somalia in the "Free the Children from War" Conference held in Paris on 5 and 6 February 2007 was welcomed as a positive sign of its commitment to the protection of children under its jurisdiction in the context of armed conflict;

(f) The Transitional Federal Government of Somalia was encouraged to ratify the Convention on the rights of the Child and to become a party to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict;

(g) It was noted that the recommendations of the Working Group were developed in the context of expected progress in the national reconciliation Congress and process in Somalia, and that such progress was also key to the improvement of child protection and needed to be encouraged.

44. Further to the discussion, the experts were entrusted with negotiating the Group's draft recommendations to the Council as follow-up to the Secretary-General's report.

45. Mr. Daniel Toole, Director of the UNICEF Office of Emergency Programmes, then introduced the Secretary-General's "horizontal note", drawing attention to three crises, in Côte d'Ivoire, Nepal and the Sudan:

(a) Concerning Côte d'Ivoire, he noted that although the Ouagadougou Peace Agreement signed in March 2007 did not directly affect the situation of children in armed conflict, who were still involved in the militias, it contributed considerably to improving the situation of children in Côte d'Ivoire;

(b) He briefed the Group on positive developments in Nepal; the Government of Nepal had ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict. However, the

children had sill not been released from the PCN-M cantonment areas, their rights continued to be violated and they were still not receiving reintegration assistance;

(c) Turning to the Sudan, he noted that the situation was getting worse in the eastern part of that country where access restrictions had severely constrained monitoring and reporting activities. Security had deteriorated in Darfur. The Janjaweed, the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army and other armed groups had killed 36 children in January. Many of the victims of continuing LRA attacks were children. While the Sudanese Armed Forces continued to deny that there were children in their ranks, the Sudan People's Liberation Army had acknowledged the presence of children.

46. The Chairman informed members of the Group that the Chadian authorities had confirmed their willingness to cooperate with the Working Group and signalled that they were prepared to participate in the consideration by the Working Group of the next report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Chad. The Chairman of the Working Group pledged to persevere in his efforts to convince the authorities of other countries listed in annex II of the report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict (S/2006/826) to give positive consideration to cooperating with the Working Group in the near future.

IV. Final observations

47. The Working Group devoted its first year to adopting all the decisions necessary for its effective operation and has over the past year been resolutely focusing on its core activity under the mandate conferred on it by the Security Council: the consideration of reports of the Secretary-General on specific situations prepared in connection with the monitoring and reporting mechanism provided for in resolution 1612 (2005), and the adoption, based on that resolution, of recommendations and concrete actions for enhancing the protection of children in armed conflict.

48. Despite the challenges inherent to the establishment of any new mechanism, the Group was able to adopt substantive conclusions — which are expected to gradually contribute to improving the situation of children in the field — on all the situations brought before it. It should be stressed that the Working Group engaged in constructive dialogue with each of the countries concerned, as demonstrated by their active participation in the meetings of the Group and their broadly positive response to the Group's conclusions.

49. The Working Group must continue these efforts with a view to considering all the situations of conflict where children are recruited or used by armed forces or armed groups, in conformity with the mandate given by the Security Council.

50. At its next meeting, the Group will start taking up anew situations it has already considered once and on which it had adopted conclusions. The meeting would afford an opportunity to evaluate the follow-up to these conclusions, assess their impact, enhance them or consider new avenues if necessary.

51. It is still too early to draw firm conclusions on the impact in the field of the work of the Security Council Working Group on children and armed conflict. However, recent developments in Côte d'Ivoire, where several hundred child soldiers were released before the signing of the peace agreement, the recent signing

of action plans by some parties in the Sudan, the commitments made by several Governments last February at the Paris "Free Children from War" conference, or directly in the context of meetings of the Working Group, are encouraging signs which must spur us to persevere along the path set out by Security Council resolution 1612 (2005).